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Title: Populism, Political Legitimacy & Digital Communication: An Alternative Conversation (Draft).

Abstract:

The topic of Populisms and its perceived threat the legitimacy of liberal democracies is a topic with no shortage of attention more so in like the US and Europe that are synonymous with liberal democracies. Another topic that is frequently mentioned with populism is that of digital communications, often referencing the ways in which populism has found a foothold of expression through digital platforms on social media. Taking an alternative approach this chapter looks at the populist threat posed to liberal democracies as stemming from an interruption of Western liberal political traditions, simultaneously traditions discussing the ways in which populism seeks legitimacy through avenues of digital legitimacy. Having identified the populist threat to legitimacy as a matter of deviation from the Western liberal political traditions the paper prods at what populism could mean for democracies in regions like Africa that lack of Western liberal political traditions.

Introduction:

The victory of populism in Europe again has added to the heated debate about the populist threat populist poses to liberal democracies, globally but particularly in Europe. Not only this but there has an upswell in the scholarly attention given the critical role played by digital communication platforms¹ (social media) in the growth & reach of populism globally. Despite the regularity in discussion, it seems that many views on populism go off the predetermined conclusion that populism is detrimental to political legitimacy, as opposed to it being a neutral tool in legitimization or possibly positive tool in the democrats' toolkit. At the same time, the never-ending development of digital communication, its influence on the public sphere of engagement, its usage by populists has forged interests towards understanding how populists behave in the digital space & what the result of this behavior is on their surrounding political reality.

Aims & structure of paper:

The inspiration behind chapter comes from a 2017 publication titled "*The Populist Challenge to Political Legitimacy: A Crisis of Social Validation*" by Carl Humphries (2017)². Normally, the crisis of liberal democracy at the hands of populism is attributed to the possibilities of populism turning towards less representative, more exclusionary, less accountable form of government citing that the actual threat of populism is towards the institutions that hold up liberalism (Liddiard, 2019). Peculiarly, Humphries points out that a part of this legitimization crisis is stems from the sudden disruption to normative political life caused by populist expression- not so much a crisis of institutions but of political culture. This spurred the thought that if populism is a threat to political legitimacy because it unsettled political life normally

¹ Simply put- online communication efforts, here digital communication is made to include the digital media like news sites/blogs as well as digital social media platforms like Facebook/Twitter/WhatsApp etc.

² A disclaimer that the inspiration comes after multiple-rereads of the paper. In my interpretation of some of points made I may have oversimplified. To best understand what Humphries puts across it is suggested that the paper be read by the reader: DOI 10.4467/20843887PI.17.001.9273

expected from liberal democracy, would it hold a different outcome in regions outside of liberal Western political traditions.

Intending only to be a modest conversation, with two overarching aims. Fitting with the book's subject matter the first aim discussing how at how populism uses digital communication to bolster its approaches to political legitimacy together with it shapes political realities. Shifting towards the line of thought inspired by Humphries the second aim glances towards how populism creates other possible consequences or outcomes for political legitimacy outside of liberal democracies.

Structurally the chapter is in two main parts with three overall sections. Part one is aligned with the first aim of the paper & is fractured into two sections. Section one dealing with providing conceptual foundations of key terms like populism, digital communication & legitimacy. Section two is a discussion on how populists make use of digital communication to legitimate themselves and to craft specific realities. Part two is shorter, thrashing out the opening Humphries creates in suggesting that there are other possible consequences populism has for political legitimacy in regions of the globe that have democracies that are less liberal (both theoretically and practically) where legitimacy expectations are informed by alternative schools of political thought like anarchism or socialism. In addition to this the chapter has a secondary goal of wanting to see the impact, if any, populism has in the changing geo-political order.

Part 1:

Conceptualization of Concepts:

For us to have a conversation around how populism creates & communicates its legitimacy through digital communications we should have a foundational understanding on concepts that are central to the conversation, these are populism, legitimacy, liberal democracy & political communication.

Needless for us here is an exhaustive dilation on exactly populism is not because such discussions aren't difficult to conclude due to populism's "constitutive ambiguity" that makes it challenging to accurately define it considering its numerous manifestations (Meny & Surel, 2002). Many scholars, intellectuals' or authors have dedicated tremendous energies in attempts of finding consensus on populism's definition, also articulating whether it is a distinctive type of political strategy, a political ideology or social movement? a political style or strategy or communications strategy? (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013, Weyland 2017, Laclau 2005). In addition, there is a back & forth on whether or not populism poses a threat to democracy or is a corrective aspect of it, if alongside its 'negative impacts it may have positive influences on how democracy functions while finding legitimacy (Conovan 2002, Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012 in Skenderovic 2017).

A healthy start for us is noting populism's primarily identifiable features, these being an 'appeal to 'the people', an anti-elitist stance in combined with a 'critique of the establishment & lastly a belief in the general will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013, 2017). More "dangerous types" of populism includes the polarization of the two groups through the creating of an 'us' vs 'them' narrative³ (Aiginger, 2020). For our definition, the most understanding of populism is provided by Mudde, who articulates it as "an ideology

³ Although this polarization through the use of an 'us vs them' is a feature of both Left and Right wing populism

that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous & antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ verses ‘the corrupt elite’⁴, arguing that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populism is also generally understood to be a ‘thin ideology’ - which is a loose complex of attitudes, able to attach itself to a host ideology as opposed to it being a fully coherent collective of ideas that constitute a complete worldview (Kramer, 2014, Sorensen 2017). Postil posits that the roots of populism are ‘knotty’, not being able to be reduced to singular factors like the neo-liberal system or economic causes alone & are likely to be found in “thick tangles of economic, cultural, existential, or other factors yet to be thoroughly investigated (2018).

Digital communication on the other hand is a mash up terms digital and communication. Simplistically digital can be understood as online or on the internet whereas communication for Waisbord “refers to forms of expression and social interactivity by which individuals and societies exchange ideas and values and develop a sense of individual and collective self”. Digital communication is comprised of a wide and expansive network of systems and platforms that Postil (2018) & Cheeseman (2018) not insulated from the rest of the ‘hybrid media systems’ that are themselves embedded in an even wider system of communication including transportation networks, churches, mosques, schools, city squares or even slums- places where face-to-face populist communication often thrives. An example of some aspects of digital communication are some of its more stand out components like social media and online news or media outlets.

Liberal democracy has historically proved problematic to define owing to increased difficulties in making the distinction between three very separate concepts: liberalism, democracy & the historically contingent set of institutions to which North Americans and Western Europeans have become used to Mounk (2019)⁵. Democracy be understood in its most basic form that when translated ends up in the literal term government of the people (Becker & Raveloson 2008). Mouffe (2000) in Laclue (2005) supply two central aspects of democracy which are “on one side, democracy as form of rule that is the principle of the sovereignty of the people, and the on the other side, the symbolic framework within which this democratic rule is exercise(d). The novelty of modern democracy is that the old democratic principle that ‘power should be exercised by the people emerges again, but this time within a symbolic framework informed by the liberal discourse, with its strong emphasis on the value of individual liberties and human rights” (parenthesis added).

Liberalism- understood here in the Rawlsian sense- is broken down into three key dimensions: the inevitable acceptance of a plurality of divisions in society, the quest for political moderation and overlapping consensus, and the quest for the rule of law and the rights of minorities’ (Papas 2019, Canihac 2022). Adding to this definition would be Mounk’s uses of the term as “somebody who is committed to basic values like freedom of speech, the separation of powers, or the protection of individual rights” (2019).

⁴ Both the ideas of ‘the pure people’ (the people) and ‘the elite’ in essence are vague and constantly shifting. The general question of who exactly ‘the people’ are is continuously contested because they can, and have been defined in different ways and to include different groups -See Laclau (2005, 202), Mouffe (2018) (although Urbinati (2019) highlights that the populist interpretation of the ‘the people’ is interested in stressing the inclusion of the ‘ordinary’ people, the conceptualization of who the ordinary people or the elite are is highly dependent on the context in which the populist sentiment is located.

⁵ Mounk highlights two extremely vital things when having a conversation around (Western) liberal democracy (2019). 1-the idea of liberal in liberal democracy has been given a number of meanings, most generally it is used to refer to a person’s political views, (granted Mounk prefaces this as being in the United States however I believe that this general use of liberal is global). The second thing highlighted is that due to the prestige given to democracy there has been tendency to extend its definition to include all the desirable qualities we have come to associate with democracy.

Legitimacy, much like populism is a concept with a multiplicity of definitions, although many of them center around the agreement that there needing be a certain level of confidence in the existing political system, the beliefs that constitute that system (e.g., liberalism), needing to be a common, established standard of evaluation/rules, & a general expressed acceptance of these standards, beliefs & rules⁶ (Bielinski 2017, Weber 1978, Beetham, 1991). However, disputes around ideas like who has the right to govern are historically common, along with what underpins this right thus making the problem of legitimacy – the question of what makes a government legitimacy or illegitimate and what justifies a certain type of rule or a certain system of ruling (Stillman, 1974) fairly frequent. Minimally, legitimacy itself is ‘the capacity of a political system to engender & maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society’ (Lipset 1959 in Tannenber et al 2020). Legitimacy, for us, will be a fusion of this minimal dimension with two more interpretations, first is that legitimacy is belief based- meaning the legitimacy & validity of political decisions or overall legitimacy relies on how well the establishment responds to the peoples’ beliefs on what should be done (Peter, 2020). Second is through a social understanding that sees legitimacy heavily dependent on & derived from the settled convictions of ‘the community’⁷ evaluated through; i) political interest & involvement, ii) beliefs about interpersonal & social relations relative to collective action & iii) optimism about the responsiveness of the political system (Weatherford, 1992; Musonda 2006, Wallach, 2008).

Populism & Digital Communication: How populism communicates & legitimates itself.

Our main concern in this section is to see how populism both legitimizes itself and communicates this legitimacy with the use of digital communication & its platforms. There needs to be a tweak in how we understand populism first, to snugly fit it into the framework of communication.

Populism within the scope of communications “implies a shift in focus, from *what populism is* to *what it does* and *how it does it*” (Sorensen, 2017, italics original). With this switch in perspective, concertation is given to populism as *style* of communication, how populism is communicated & what kind of impact(s) this particular communication style has (de Vresse et al 2018, Papathanassopoulos and Negrin 2019, Cramer 2011, italics my own).

Unlike defining populism, understanding how populists legitimize themselves legitimacy to their audience is a smoother task and far simpler to grasp. This is due to populisms legitimation relying on a feedthrough cycle of legitimation through delegitimization that is unsurprisingly, direct in how it seeks legitimacy and the methods it used to communicate this legitimacy

Generally, populism utilizes its central ideological tenants as points of legitimation. In establishing their legitimacy populists craft an identification with ‘the people’ - populists emulate/create a direct bond with ‘the people’ and citing a “desire to achieve or restore the total sovereignty of the people, with them as being the people’s true representative, this communicated through their *claiming popular sovereignty* (Wirth et al, 2016). In the following step, an identity of ‘others’ is manufactured, where the elite or the establishment that is not one with the people if then identified by. Once this is completed the cycle begins by capitalizing on the general socio-economic frustrations experienced by ‘the people’ and portraying them the results of

⁶ If interested on a further breakdown of political legitimacy see Beetham’s chapter in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology* 2012

⁷ Seen in Musonda (2006: 119) & interpreted by author as ‘the people’

the structural failures of the current establishment. These conditions/frustrations can include high unemployment, a sense of loss in national identity, a sense of being ignored by the government, high crime, or an economy that seems to not favor the average person. From here they say ‘that government is not legitimate because they do not understand the needs or issues of the people, only we do. Only a government that has a direct link to the people can actively provide the solutions needed by the people’. Although seemingly rudimentary- this process in which they legitimize themselves through forcing bonds with the people and then delegitimize others by casting them as outsiders is the primary way populist look to create legitimacy.

The fun is found how populisms communicates its legitimacy and how it uses digital communication to do so. Considering the first aspect of the cycle, legitimation -some of ways this is communicated is through fervent interactions with their followers/constituent including ‘being on the ground’, demonstration of their regular physical presence -impromptu talks or appearances at communal meetings polls - ways of simulating getting directive feedback from ‘the people’, or anything that resembles ways of shortening distance between legitimate authority and the people (Ostiguy, 2017). That they are not only always there *for* the people, but they are also constantly *with* the people. Another key characteristic in populisms display of closeness to the people is what Ostiguy (2017) conceptualizes as “’flaunting of the low”⁸, behavior that relies on the use of popular, coarse accessible and at times vulgar, dramatic or even politically incorrect language that aim at grabbing the attention of the public (Ostiguy 2017, Waisbord, 2019 Resnick 2017) meant to symbolize a belonging to the common peoples, unlike the elites who are restrained in both their speech and action.

Digitally this is communicated through the replication of these same methods, either via the social media polls or the flagrant expression of this ‘flaunting of the low’ as in the case the brand of inflammatory tweets used by Donald Trump during his tenure as US president (prior to his social media ban). Still, it is not enough to say populisms duplication of in-person interactions online explains how it uses digital communication to better legitimize itself. Rather, the collisions of (1) social medias restructuring of the public sphere, (2) the change in how mainstream media operates and (3) digital communications capabilities for widespread interactive political engagements in real time are what lend themselves to increased legitimation through digital communications

One of the more complex phenomena is indeed what Spiekermann (2020) & Vallespin & Bascunan (2019) identify as the restructuring of the public sphere by social media (but digital communication broadly), in both how it functions & how citizens relate to one another.

(1) Restructuring of the Public Sphere.

Shortened, the public sphere⁹ exists to expose us to different thoughts & opinions, where the is deliberative transparency & public scrutiny around ideas and information, promotes the equality of democratic opportunity where participants have the choice to freely interact & much relate as equals in hopes of

⁸ Read Ostiguy’s chapter titled ‘Populism: A social- Cultural Approach’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, here Ostiguy details that there are highs and lows in politics, each with having to do with connecting deeply with a society’s history, existing group differences, identities and resentments, relating to people in relation to existing social-cultural identities that allows the voter to recognize a politician as ‘one of ours’ (2017).

⁹ For ease of use the public sphere is taken to mean a space of interaction and deliberation accessible to everyone- public deliberation beyond courtrooms, parliament and election campaigns (Spiekermann, 2020).

developing common knowledge and amicable understandings between social groups¹⁰ (Spiekermann, 2020). Whereas initially there was optimism in the development of the digital communication because it held the chances for the expansion into a universe of informed discussions and credible opinions there has now been a festering concern about the harmful influence social networks have on the quality of public discourse (Spiekermann, 2020).

Reasons for the decay consist of social medias dramatic increase of the number of online contributions but frankly consumers can only interact with and digest a small amount of this content that is constantly flowing in. This inability to interact with everything that is being uploaded onto social media platforms forces users to filter the content provided to them, many depend on the curated feed made by Twitter's social algorithm to do this for them. Huddling together, sees different users being shown different tweets as a result of their chosen networks, undermining the public sphere function of transparent deliberation or scrutiny of information. Furthermore, the ability to select the type of content that users interact with creates online filter bubbles, that can be described as online cul-de-sacs of homogenous thought as opposed to dynamic spaces of conversation over varying opinions (Groshe & Koc-Michalska, 2017). As the transmedia space, in which social media replicates the public space in providing a social imaginary for the people's voice as well as it being a great venue for 'the people's rally' (Postill, 2018) gradually shrinks offering less space for expansive holistic discussion the social imaginary people take part in then becomes more limited and narrow- influencing their views on reality.

Social media's reduction of deliberative transparency in the public sphere makes it easier to create skewed views of how preferences or opinions are distributed across society- if most of your social media peers agree with you in comparison to those in disagreement it thus becomes easier to create an assumption of perception-based consensus.

(2) Change in how Mainstream media operates.

When compared to the restructuring of the public sphere the changes in how mainstream media functions is more simplistic- although this change is interlinked to the shift in the public sphere.

Modern mainstream media faces similar issues due to digital communication as the traditional public sphere being saturated with various information outlets forcing media outlets to compete for limited attentions of the public. This is the case with most news outlets, especially online where clicks and internet interactions equate to views and revenues. Online media in an attempt to 'audience please' has adopted a strategy that seeks to quickly attract viewers, as such it looks for sensational stories in order to quickly capture public attention- in turn information is diluted, sensationalized, dramatized and presented to the public in black and white terms (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, Mazzolnei 2003, Meyer 2006 in Cranmer 2011). Populist communication is, oddly enough, almost hand crafted to fit well with the media, as a lot of populist sentiment operates on capturing the attention of the people in ways that break the political status quo, offering exactly what the media is looking for. Sharply, the prevalence of anti-elitist tone in online communication processes more reactions, shares and comments- pointing to the reality that the usage of populist language does indeed pay off in attracting more reactions for parties or political aspirants online (Osman et al 2021). Consequently, populist presence on media platforms, especially online where the reach of these platforms is nearly infinite, assists in strengthening populist legitimacy- through providing them a

¹⁰ I strongly recommend reading the text by Spiekermann for the full outlining of the functions and properties of the public sphere along with how social media has altered them.

platform that allows them to seem more official but another avenue to share their ideas, which slowly normalizes them as normal, viable public sentiment that is a part of mainstream political life.

(3) Digital Communications interactivity.

A final aspect in the cocktail of populist legitimation through digital communication is the interactivity facilitated by online platforms that populists can use to mirror a direct link between them and ‘the people’. Social media has constructed a way of showing allegiance to either a person, an ideal or an organization, simply through a click of the mouse (Barlett et al., 2011). The mouse can be used past showing allegiance, it can also be used to actively participate in digital programs providing a way for ‘populist movement to further their plebiscitary views, seen by the proposition of these features as bottom-up recuperation of popular sovereignty’ (Gerbaudo, 2014).

Spain’s Podemos exemplifies this through facilitating online engagements on Plaza Podemos, a discussion software that uses threaded discussion and ranking features that are similar to those found on Reddit, where these online engagements were first platformed (Gerbaudo, 2019). These engagements allow the initiation of policy proposals or statute changes by members- implementing a threshold mechanism for proposals to be successful and possibly lead to a binding decision (Kautz 2021, Gerbaudo 2019). A matter of the platform of digital communication uses is of equal importance, evidence provided by shows that in the case of Spain’s 2016 general elections made use of Facebook to relate to his audience while the leftist populist party of Podemos instead made concentrated use of Twitter where due to the domination of more liberal users held a clear advantage (Mucha & Negre, 2016 in Postil 2018).

This is amplification of legitimizing through increased interaction with the people comes through social media’s interactive features that are embedded in its architecture like informal voting systems & its ‘one-to-one’ and ‘one to many’ principle that can serve to either consolidate opinions within populist groups or to mobilize the masses (Gerbaudo 2014, Schmidt 2017).

All of the aforementioned, when blended with the emergence of ‘post-truth communication’¹¹, exposes that digital populists have no shortage of ways in which they can communicate their particular reality while building legitimacy to their intended audience to further entrench their legitimacy. When boiled down, this means is that populists are able to create worlds of their own perception, in which users consume their beliefs, that in turn further entrenches and legitimates them as being one with the people. Fewer populists are as aware of this as former United States president Donald Trump saying “I think that maybe I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Twitter...I have close to 100 million people watching me on Twitter, including Facebook, including all of the Instagram, including POTUS, including lots of things – but we have – I guess pretty close to 100 million people. I have my own form of media” (Donald trump in Cilliza, 2017, cited from Moffitt 2019).

Alternative Democracies: Can populism create other outcomes for political legitimacy outside of the West?

¹¹ See Waisbord (2018). Post truth communication is understood as a state of affairs in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion in comparison to appeals to emotion and personal belief (Oxford University Press, 2017).

To refresh, the genius behind second half of this chapter comes from Humphries (2017) assessment of liberal democracies legitimacy issue being at crisis from the populist interruption of expected liberal values tied to the liberal democratic traditions present in these democracies. Inferred from this assessment is that in places that lack liberal traditions but are democratic populism may hold the potential to create alternative outcomes to the political realities where liberal democracies have failed. Presently our aim is not to answer how populism creates alternatives to political legitimacy outside of democracy (the short answer for this is that it does not). Rather, our objective is seeing how populism in regions outside of the West legitimizes non-liberal democratic forms¹², if at all. This line of enquiry will be limited to Africa & the populist expressions found there.

A quick refresher- the dangers proposed to liberal democracy by populism have little to do with democracy itself. When staying true to its central claims populism is a hallmark democratic having no ambition to remove itself from democracy because of its corrective ability to ensure the inclusion of minority groups that feel excluded (Katlwasser, 2012). Meaning populism exists within democracy and looks for legitimation democratically. Ruth & Hawkins express this, arguing that “populist parties & movements assert that political elites have failed in their duty to represent the people and that they have done so systematically, protected by liberal institutions. Populists do not so much claim that liberal institutions are inherently bad—who is against freedom?—as they argue that they are insufficient to the task of representation. *Only by removing elites and transforming institutions to ensure broad representation can freedoms be fully enjoyed.* Thus, populism claims to remedy the lack of correspondence between government outputs and citizens’ preferences” (2018, italics added). Legitimacy’s crisis is birthed from frustration with the liberalness’ of democracy, which does not refer to rights or freedoms but instead is associated with representative individualist, privates, capitalist governments that are functionally limited (Schmitter, 2018) relying on institutions that are not inclusive or accessible to the people. Liberalism is here is tweaked to mean these negative associations.

Similar to Latin-America, the aftermath of the third wave of democratization in Africa was the installations of democratic mechanisms (elections, rudimentary attempts/imitations at creating a separation of power) in a region that lacked liberal traditions limiting their potential for being were full liberal democracies (Zakaria, 1997). Since then, countries where populist expressions have been located countries like Zambia, South Africa, Tanzania or Kenya have displayed functional democratic processes but still battle with cultivating a deep-rooted liberal tradition. In truth the challenges faced can be attributed ‘the neglect to ask questions rooted in the simple logic that if there is a liberal democracy, there must be an alternative democracy, one that is unmoored to Western political evolution’ (Ochonu, 2020) as well as the reality that Western-style democracies in Africa are largely just modification of colonial style laws and are often at odd with local political culture (Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2019).

Does populism in Africa hold the potential to ask these question & while doing so introduce alternative democratic forms? Honestly, no.

Here what is important is the potentiality of populism for alternative democracies does not immediately imply a shift away from value like minority rights including their protection, rule of law, accountability &

¹² This refers to democracies that are influenced by alternative democratic traditions instead of the Western liberal democratic tradition & its expected associations, not illiberal democracies.

participation. What it considers substitutivity are the ways these could be married to traditional African consensual leadership practices & democratic practices¹³” (Ochuno 2020). These alternative outcomes do not necessarily need to be exact replicas of traditional or cultural democracies. Even with these prerequisite complications arise Realistically due to Africa’s tribal and ethnic diversity. Realistically it would not only be impractical due to differences in traditional cultural practices, opens the door for the deepening of ethnic & tribal political disputes, a matter that already plagues the continent.

In lieu, a suggestion may be the introduction or inclusion of more direct democracy- the type of democracy usually associated with populist sentiment, based solely on their claims of a direct link between the government and the people, with an increase of general political participation and a more direct link between the people and the government. A return to governing from the streets¹⁴. Minimally populism can help improve local democratic participation, even outside of traditional democracies.

Cheeseman illustrates populisms potential for increasing democratic participation through the introduction of ‘ethnically blind politics’ in Africa (2018). Populisms appeal to ‘the people’, especially in cosmopolitan urban, where the exclusivity of an ethnic approach would likely fail, has a more inclusive message -focused on targeting the shared experience of the ‘growing urban poor’ & creating a collective people based on class & societal relation (Cheeseman, Resnick 2010). Populist sentiment additionally calls for the opening up of the political arena or this can be observed in placed like South Africa where populist movements/ parties like the Economic Freedom Fighters offer a fresh alternative for political expression outside of the standardized rhetoric or in the case of the vigilante social movement Operation Dudula- display that not only political parties can function as vehicles of communicating to the concerns of various communities in society.

Regardless, what these alternative forms of democracy look like is a larger, complex question and would ideally differ heavily due to a cocktail of factors including how robust and, in some cases, how radical the collective political imagination of ‘the people’ as a political collective is.

Regardless of the alternative type of democracy is to look like, the opportunity given by populism to ultimately fill the gap left by liberal representative democracy must address the focal point of populist frustrations. This focal point being greatest need is not for a different type of people centered democracy *per se*. The greatest need is not merely for democracy itself but for good and transparent governance¹⁵ (Nyyassonen & Metsala, 2020).

¹³ The mentioning of democracy here is to combat the thought that democracy in Africa

¹⁴ A reference to the statement made by former Bolivian president when faced with a wave of popular mobilization against his neo-liberal government said “they want to govern from the streets, not from parliament and within our institutions” unknowingly revealing the issue that liberal democracy is more concerned with being removed from the people and not in touch with them (Sankatsing, 2004).

¹⁵ This statement in the original text was not made in reference to populism but was made when shining light on the fallacy that democracy is synonymous with good governance when it is not, citing Richard Holbrooke on the 1996 Bosnian elections in which it was noted that legitimate elections still provide the possibility of the victory of racists, fascists, separatists)

Concluding Remarks:

As digital communication continuous becomes more and more influential in the way societies interact politically there needs to be increased attention given to the multiple realities for legitimization especially for populists. The perceived threat to liberal democracies will not subside for the foreseeable future & with this this legitimacy and indeed efficacy of the liberal democracy will remain under the question.

Despite this, the ways in which populisms existence is approached not only by defenders of liberal democracies but by believers of populism itself remains the decisive factor in determining how detrimental populism is to the stability of liberal democracies, not only in the West but also other regions of the world. Reaffirming populisms inherent neutrality while simultaneously recognizing its potentialities to increase political participation, provide representation to minorities, bridge ethnic gaps, and ultimately generate feelings of closeness with the general mass is a crucial step in the reframing of populism as function of democracy, not its enemy. This will also require a focused effort towards successfully navigate digital communication channels, using them to establish a better connection with the citizenry and the people but also to find ways to reinvigorate robust, interactive conversations in hopes of reversing the decay of the public sphere. Casting out populism as a blight to normal democratic proceedings only runs the risk of alienating the supporters of populism but also of further entrenching a growing opinion that the representative liberal democracy is indeed against the people.

Populisms talents for creating inclusion and possibly changing the democratic political landscape in the countries it is found in Africa is definitely something that should not be undermined. Ideally, populist movement must be understood as possible avenues for changing the limitations of the representative government in Africa- the widening of direct democratic components will certainly not only assist in political participation but also legitimizing whatever government that would be diligent, transparent and earnest in the addressing of issues concerning citizens.

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